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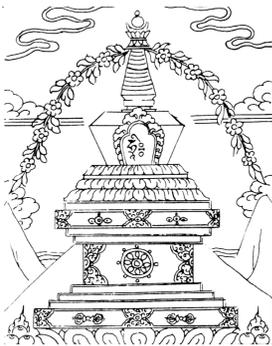
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Materials and Buddhist Diversity in North America.

By Douglas M. Padgett



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**“Americans Need Something to Sit On,”
or
Zen Meditation Materials and Buddhist Diversity in North America**

by

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Whether over the Silk Road or along the Southeast Asian coastline, for over two millennia Buddhism has moved and changed with trade. And still, the Buddhist profile on the North American cultural horizon is mercantile. Today, in brick-and-mortar stores, down the Information Superhighway, through contemporary marketing techniques, e-retailing, direct mail, and the slick Buddhist glossies that have proven so popular over the years, Buddhism continues to be transformed by commerce. In every issue, the magazines *Shambhala Sun* and *Tricycle: A Buddhist Review* run ads for meditation—or, as they tend to say, *Dharma*—supplies, the religious necessities and life-style accoutrements for the contemporary Buddhist. Among pages touting the virtues of the “Zen alarm clock” (which awakens you gently to the sound of its “Tibetan bell-like chime”), Japanese incense, Buddhist mood music, and hundreds of books (not to mention Buddhist investment schemes, educational opportunities, and vacation plans), some of the most prominent advertisements are those for meditation cushions. One particular announcement proclaims the advantages of support pillows handmade by the Buddhists of the “Russian Lamaist Order,” through their Northern California business, Fly By Nite Co. A photograph shows two cushions, one atop the other. Members of the Russian Lamaist Order apparently see themselves as belonging to the local, American branch of a Russo-Siberian tradition of central Asian Buddhism—something akin to Mongolian or Tibetan Buddhism. But, as if that were not complicated enough, the leader of the group has a Japanese

title and the cushions depicted in the ad are of a style used in East Asia. Buddhist American consumer goods have eclectic backgrounds, if nothing else.

In this paper, I take seriously the notion that the consumption of such chimerically constructed commodities should be considered neither irrelevant nor an outrage—two common responses. Rather, they are important elements for understanding the development of any religious movement, including Buddhism in America (and maybe especially Buddhism in America).¹ Though I have attempted track a number of commodities over the past months, Buddhist meditation cushions such as those of the Fly By Nite Co. that seem to have become nearly essential in the lives of certain Buddhist Americans will be the focus of my discussion. This focus on consumption and a single commodity assumes, among other considerations, that specific things and our social and economic relationships with things actually matter in the study of religion. More importantly, for me, as for Daniel Miller in his essay, “Consumption as the Vanguard of History,” it assumes that the study of consumption can constitute a critical inquiry into “the production of human values.”² Miller notes that consumption is difficult to define in a generally useful way. But he argues that it should best be seen as “dialectic between the specificity of regions, groups[,] and particular commodity forms on the one hand, and the generality of global shifts in the political economy and contradictions of culture on the other.”³ I have tried to keep this in mind. The chair, writes Edward Tenner, was never “predestined to dominate modernized humanity.” Neither are the current choices of meditation seating options inevitable. And just as chairs are “keys to a distinctively Western system of things and symbols,” so too, we might surmise, the sorts of seat we choose for meditation might be one key to the system of practices and symbols that govern Buddhist meditation in North America.⁴

I have three aims. First, I intend to describe the market in meditation cushions—the products, who makes them, who buys them, and why. Second, I want to tentatively relate the characteristics of this market to the contemporary debate over the character of Buddhist America. Finally,

I hope that my discussion will demonstrate, by example at least, how the study of consumption can be a significant avenue for interpreting cross-cultural religious transformations. My point of view may seem a bit iconoclastic, even reactionary. Today's Buddhist Americans do not often give consumption a positive, or even neutral, valence. In my conversations with Buddhists, scholars of Buddhism, and even employees of Buddhist publishing houses, I have been impressed by the rarefied, immaterial character of their view of Buddhism. From some points of view, true "spirituality" (and true Buddhism) is unrelated to the human traffic in *things*.⁵ A case in point: A recent issue of the *Shambhala Sun* contains an article entitled "Zen Sells" on "the irony of enlisting spiritual themes in the service of materialism."⁶ The article and its accompanying photographs are an attempt to expose the more glaring and hypocritical uses of the rhetoric of Zen and enlightenment in the service of marketing goods and services. My paper, in contrast, is an only slightly ironic look at how materialism—or, more accurately, consumption—conditions and is conditioned by spiritual communities. To paraphrase Leigh E. Schmidt in his work on American holidays, I am attempting to focus on the "interplay" of commerce, Buddhism, and consumption.⁷ Thus, I intend to argue that consumption is an integral aspect of Buddhism in America and that Buddhist Americans' consumption practices are, in conjunction with other factors, having a profound influence on the various ways that Buddhism in America is developing, how it is being perceived, imagined, and, finally, contested.

THE PRODUCTS

By far the most widely used type of cushion in North America is known as the *zafu*. *Zafus* are round cushions that appear to have come into use in North America via certain schools of Japanese Zen but are of Chinese origin.⁸ They are twelve to fifteen inches across and have eight to ten inches of loft. Though in Japan they are usually brown or black, here in the United States, the colors and the color combinations are almost

unlimited, and the cushions are sold in a variety of sizes. A *zafu* is often used (and marketed) in combination with the *zabuton*, a square, thick mat designed to support the meditator's knees while perched above it on the *zafu*. The larger cushion suppliers offer a significant choice of materials, washable removable covers in decorator colors, or extra stuffing material. *Zafus* generally sell for prices ranging from \$27 for one with *kapok* fill and a single color to more than \$50 for multiple colors and buckwheat hull fill. *Zabutons* run from \$32 to \$68 depending upon similar factors as well as height of loft. There are variations on each cushion, including something called a smile or crescent *zafu* (\$45 to \$47) shaped like a crescent moon, and an inflatable *zafu* (\$24.50 to \$26.50, depending upon the size) for traveling. In each case, there is significant variation in price between manufacturers.⁹

General purpose “meditation cushions” are also sold for homes or Zen centers. They are a little cheaper. These cushions are usually twelve to sixteen inches square or perhaps slightly rectangular, and have from two to four inches of loft. They may be used in combination with the *zafu* and *zabuton*, to support the hands or give extra height, or as a replacement for either. They sell for between \$28 and \$38, depending upon the size and make. A slightly larger version of this basic seat known as the *gomden* is the American innovation of a Tibetan Buddhist monk in Vermont. According to the manufacturer's advertising, *gomden* is Tibetan for “meditation seat.” It is sold at four price levels, reflecting the height of the foam used—up to six inches. The prices range from \$42 to \$51.

Low, wooden benches are marketed as an alternative to cushions for those meditators of “limited flexibility” or those who may require greater height in order to assume the appropriate posture. The benches range in size from seven to ten or more inches and vary greatly in design. Some are sold as a unit; others may be disassembled for travel. Some benches are designed to be used with a mat over the top; others are not. In one case, the bench is designed to slope from front to back, just as compressed cushion might. Depending upon the size ordered and the maker, the benches

range in price from \$45 to \$102, and all are marketed as handmade.

The populations of Buddhist American meditators and Hindu American yoga practitioners in North America are not identical. However, at least with regard to consumption, the boundaries between the two are porous, with yoga practitioners making up an overlapping circle of affiliates. In the United States, yoga seems to have a close association with meditation, requiring similar materials and training. Thus, several companies also sell yoga mats and other cushions. The yoga mat is a cotton- or foam and cotton-stuffed shell, seventy to seventy-four inches long, twenty-five to thirty inches wide, and can be rolled up like a sleeping bag. Yoga mats sell uniformly for \$88 or \$89 and may be bought with a carrying case for an extra \$20. Related cushions, such as a “yoga bolster,” sell for \$68. A third type of yoga cushion comes in a wedge-shaped design to ease pressure on the spine (like the bench above) and is stuffed with buckwheat hulls or foam. One Buddhist meditation supply company sells it as the inexpensive alternative. Yoga mats are not designed for meditation use, but for the more dynamic practices of yoga, though manufacturers market them, of course, to be used in a variety of unanticipated ways, including meditation. Such an unintended, local multiplicity of purposes is a hallmark of the commodification of cushions and other Buddhist-associated objects in North America, if not of global capitalism more generally.

THE PRODUCERS

Over the last two years I have identified eight commercial makers of Buddhist meditation cushions currently in operation in the United States. Besides these eight, however, there are cushion makers who do not sell their product, sell only to their own members, or only perform finishing work on cushions purchased at discount from one of the eight others. Finally there are dozens of retailers of meditation materials and books who resell the work of any one of these eight. Significantly, these retailers come from all backgrounds—Tibetan, Zen, Theravāda, and those of no particular affiliation—but all sell the same products. Only one of the

Tibetan retailers also sells Tibetan rugs for meditation.

Of the eight, five are for-profit, privately-owned concerns. The other three are the business ventures of non-profit Buddhist organizations that generate income and supply their members with necessary supplies. I have had interviews with representatives of six of the eight. They all sell primarily in Buddhist magazines and over the Internet. All have remained locally-oriented in their production to the greatest extent possible. It is difficult to determine the relative sizes of any of the eight cushion makers because they are reluctant to speak in detail of their total sales and income. Furthermore, in at least one case, the work is communal to a great degree. Nevertheless, in conjunction with the larger American economy, business appears to be good for all concerned. Several experienced large growth through the mid-1990s with new marketing campaigns and media exposure, aided by the rising profile of Buddhism on the American cultural scene. Their relative positions in the cushions market are not at all fixed, but the market is small and not likely to grow much. Still, as many of their representatives noted to me, the cushion makers are not out to build monopolies. Particularly with regard to sales to practicing Buddhists, some feel that they have reached a ceiling. Some are happy with that and content to let the present situation develop. Others are attempting to expand the business out to non-Buddhist meditators (such as practitioners of Christian meditation) and to those just beginning to experiment with meditation.

Representatives of the businesses that I spoke with agree on a number of points about the cushion business. All of them, with varying degrees of emphasis, see the business as a mission of sorts, a way to propagate the *Dharma*. They earnestly maintain that their cushions are a valuable, if not essential, part of meditation, stressing proper posture and questioning the ability or will of Americans to reach that posture without cushion support. They see what they do as a way to spread the word about Buddhism, about the general benefits of meditation apart from meditation, and, in some instances, about Buddhist ideas on suffering, enlightenment, reincarnation, and karma. Meditation instructions, Buddhist art, and

Buddhist charities figure prominently in their advertising and in the non-business events and groups they support. Social ethical issues are also a consistent theme in their business practices. Cushion makers like to buy locally if they can. They do not like to buy from businesses in or associated with the People's Republic of China, especially if they are affiliated with a Tibetan lineage. Several of those who make their living off the cushion trade stressed to me that they see their involvement in Buddhist commerce as a "right livelihood," one of the steps of the Eightfold Path to enlightenment. Below, I will discuss two representatives each of non-profit and for-profit cushion makers.

NON-PROFIT VENTURES

Two of the three non-profit businesses are located in California. One of these, whose advertisement I described in the introduction, is the Fly By Nite Co., the business arm of the Russian Lamaist Order, a San Francisco organization founded in the late 1960s by a European-Russian immigrant from Siberia who went by the title of "Doctor-Bishop Ajari." (His name is, as yet, unknown to me.) This man, now deceased, was, according to his followers, not only knowledgeable of his own Tibetan-style Buddhist tradition, but of the Japanese as well. "Ajari" is the Japanese form of the Sanskrit *acharya* ("teacher"). I was told that his teachings eclectically combined elements of these various Buddhist traditions. He started several money-earning projects for his organization in 1973 of which the cushion business is the only one remaining. Apparently, the religious arm of his organization has gone into decline as well, given that one of his followers told me there were "very few" of them left now. They are small, and their product line is limited to *zafus*, *zabutons*, and the all-purpose meditation cushion (both *kapok* and buckwheat hull variety), with few color options. Still they are doing well enough to advertise in *Tricycle*.

Far larger and more successful, Samadhi Cushions is a business arm of the Tibetan Karma Choling center in Vermont. Samadhi began making meditation cushions in 1971 in a barn at the center in order to supply their young practitioners with seating. Though of a Tibetan background,

their leader, Chogyam Trungpa, was similarly taken with Japanese meditation styles. Because, to the Western way of doing things, there is no comfortable model for meditation seating in the Tibetan traditions, the *zafu/zabuton* combination was appropriated. After all, as one of their managers told me, they figured that “Americans need something to sit on.” (The representative with whom I spoke did not seem to be aware of the central Asian practice of sitting on rugs.) After twenty-five years of doing business out of the barn, in 1996 they moved their operation down the road to the village of Barnet, where they keep an office, store, and workshop. The organization currently employs ten people in sewing, stuffing, selling, and managing the product line, using home stitchers in the area for their cushions and local wood workers for all their benches. The president of the company is the director of the *Dharma* center, but the business manager is not a part of the organization and not a Buddhist. Despite its institutional affiliations, Samadhi Cushions is operated as a moneymaking venture by the center. The representative with whom I spoke at greatest length, though also a Buddhist, is an accountant and business consultant on contract. The company has grown significantly since 1971. Between 1975 and 1985, the center and the business expanded rapidly, along with meditation practice nationwide. Growth has leveled since. One manager estimates that they did \$250,000 in sales in 1980 and twice that in 1996.

FOR-PROFIT VENTURES

After a number of conversations with the proprietors of for-profit Buddhist business ventures, it was difficult for me not to feel a sense of admiration and sympathy for their work. The cushion trade is not always an easy one. The women running these operations have similar stories. Both began making cushions through their affiliations with *Dharma* centers. Because these centers did not seem to want to become involved in commercial ventures, they struck out their own, financially at least. Both have now achieved some measure of financial stability and even success. DharmaCrafts may be the largest maker and retailer of meditation cushions

in the country. They sell many other items as well, such as imported statues and incense from Korea and Nepal. DharmaCrafts began in 1979 in the Cambridge Zen Center (a Korean center) and rented space from the center until recently. They sell by catalog and on the Internet. They are to be considered, as the proprietor told me without the barest hint of pride, by any standard, a “middle-sized company.” For the founder, Diane, her company is a way to support Buddhists as well as make a living. She designs and makes everything that she can in her own shop, with seven employees, four office dogs, an office baby, and occasional part-time help from the center. She frequently travels to Korea to visit her teacher where also she buy goods for import. She does most of her Nepalese buying through an agent. Though she also believes that the meditation cushions market is “maxed out,” she does see some growth potential in Christian meditators and yoga practitioners. Diane, expressing a sentiment common to other representatives who spoke with me, said that she has no desire to encroach on the market niches or product innovations of others, such as the inflatable *zafu* or the *gomden*, for instance. She noted that everyone needs to make a living. She also told me that, for her, that living includes being able to spread the word about Buddhist meditation and to do so in a way that is as non-disruptive as possible.

Carolina Morning Designs, located in the Blue Ridge, has been growing steadily, though its business is limited to cushions and benches. Their motto is “Meditation: Support for a Peaceful World.” The company was founded in 1985 by Linsi, a Bostonian who had worked for DharmaCrafts for a few years. She had moved to the Southern Dharma Retreat Center, a “non-denominational” facility in the Blue Ridge, from the northern U.S. and wanted to start the business as a “little cottage industry to support the center.”¹⁰ The board turned her down, but suggested that she do it on her own. It has been a slow road. In the mid-1990s, she was still only grossing about 50,000 dollars a year.¹¹ Her husband Patrick, who used to run an award-winning literary magazine called *Kokopelli Notes*, says they are still just trying to reach a comfortable level, but at least they are able to make cushions full-time now. In a recent profile,

Patrick is quoted as saying, “This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where spiritual practice meets mundane practical reality.”¹² Amidst all their plans, he told me, sits the notion of right livelihood keeping them balanced between their business as a spiritual practice and their business as a business. In most ways, then, for Patrick, they are guided by their non-financial goal: making meditation mainstream. “It’s hard not to be caught up in the competition,” he said. Referring to the other players in the cushions market, he said, “I want to call what we have ‘co-optertition.’ But I don’t think everybody else feels that way.”

THE CUSTOMERS

Identifying the consumers of these meditation cushions is a complicated task, presenting a set of problems familiar to observers of Buddhism in North America. Demographic data on minority religions such as Buddhism are scarce and speculative at best. Furthermore, typologies of Buddhism in the West are not a settled issue among those who study American Buddhism, though they generally seem to have more in common than otherwise. I will not restate the various arguments here (though virtually all are useful in particular contexts). It is now, however, commonly held that there are fundamental and significant distinctions among Buddhist Americans based upon not only ethnicity, but levels of affiliation, class, and forms of practice, as well as national or cultural background. Some have argued that the major fault line lies between those who meditate and those who do not, and it is this distinction that, of course, seems particularly relevant to the consumption of meditation cushions. Jan Nattier refers to most meditating Buddhists as “Elite Buddhists.” In her understanding of the American Buddhist scene, Elite Buddhist are those privileged, well-educated Americans with time enough and money enough to devote themselves to some level of meditation and the study of Buddhist concepts.¹³

For the purposes of this paper, however, Elite Buddhism is not wholly defined by actual meditation practice, but rather by a particular consumer orientation. I am interested in their consumption habits. In consumption

anthropology, they might be known as “highbrow Buddhists.” They may be meditators; they may not. In either case, they have certainly adopted consumption habits indicating a minimal level of understanding and commitment to a Buddhist practice. I am adopting Nattier’s term because those whom I call Elite Buddhists are those who are making investments of one sort or another in meditation. Thomas A. Tweed has referred to some of the people I am trying to identify as “night-stand” Buddhists—Buddhist sympathizers and seekers for whom the most regular “practice” is passive—reading Buddhist books, listening to “Buddhist” music, watching Buddhist videos, thinking about Buddhist concepts.¹⁴ Taken together, these night-stand Buddhists and Elite Buddhists, as well as Tweed’s other categories of Buddhist affiliates, “horse-shed Buddhists” (occasional practitioners), “Buddhist interpreters” (journalists and scholars), and “Dharma hoppers” (permanent seekers who move from community to community) constitute a coherent population of people with knowledge about and interest in Buddhism. They appear to be affiliates of something like what Tweed has referred to, in the Victorian context, as a “community of discourse.”¹⁵ For my purposes, perhaps, most importantly, these are also the people who are buying things that, in some way are symbolically or culturally associated with Buddhism. Thus, this community of discourse might just as appropriately be referred to collectively as a “community of consumption.”¹⁶

The producers of cushions themselves of course implicitly identify Elite Buddhists as a coherent community of consumption as well as a community of meditators. They use the same media to sell to the same people, advertising in Buddhist journals (*Shambhala Sun*, *Tricycle*, and a few others) with identical forays outside the Buddhist print community into the more commercial and larger circulation *Yoga Journal*. (According to the producers, when companies do go farther afield, to, for example, *Vegetarian Times* or *New Age* publications, the results are always unsatisfactory.) Though only one of the cushion manufacturers admits to having a sophisticated marketing system, they all have the advertising departments of these journals at their disposal. The magazines themselves

present an interesting, if one-dimensional, entry into the demographic characteristics of Elite Buddhist Americans. According to the *Tricycle* media card, their target readership is the United States' 150,000 non-Asian American Buddhists (defined by their own surveys, apparently), 5,000,000 Asian American Buddhists, and any others who are interested. In point of fact of course, *Tricycle*, like its advertisers and readers, is predominantly concerned with those readers possessing contemporary, mass-market oriented consumption habits—and who are also practicing or interested in meditation-oriented Buddhism. *Tricycle*'s advertising department claims for the magazine a subscription base of 30,000 and a newsstand draw of 25,000, with an estimated readership (factoring in multiple readers per copy) of 150,000. Over half of this number are considered to be non-Buddhist.¹⁷ *Shambhala Sun* similarly claims a readership and rate base of 35,000. The average household income for *Tricycle* readers is \$50,000 or more and \$72, 000 for *Shambhala Sun* readers, with 50 percent having incomes between \$60,000 and \$90,000. *Shambhala Sun* furthermore notes that 35 percent of their readership are professionals in the “medical/alternative health care, legal, financial, or counseling fields.” As evidence of the assertion that we are, in some significant way, talking about people who might actually meditate, *Shambhala Sun* finds that 90 percent have “visited a contemplative center or retreat center in the past year.”¹⁸

The spokesperson for several companies expanded on the *Tricycle* data for me. For the private companies, 25 percent or more of sales is wholesale; quite a lot of both wholesale and retail sales goes to schools, *Dharma* centers, and Buddhist prison fellowships. Significantly, the *Dharma* centers to which these cushions are sold are of every variety—Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan centers all buy *zafus* and *zabutons*. But most sales are made to private individuals. The customers are educated, wealthy, thirty-five to fifty years old, and evenly divided between male and female. Between 25 and 35 percent of sales on average go to customers in California, with another 20 to 30 percent to New England and New York. Florida and the rest of the West Coast receive about ten percent

each. The “Heartland,” as one owner called the land between the coasts, receives most of the rest. The fact that many of their products are locally made or American made is actually a large selling point. In advertising and selling, their principle is to tell as much as possible about the product, so materials and make are part of that information.

CUSHIONS AND THE ELITE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

In the characteristics of the commodities described above, in their lack of traditional Asian variability and their new overabundance of color and style options, in their make, their use, and in the sentiments surrounding their manufacture, we see indications of the direction being charted by and for Elite Buddhists. The consumption habits of these Buddhist Americans seem to indicate a predilection for Zen or East Asian material forms. In an informal survey of some of the largest Zen/Chan/Son, Vipassana, and Tibetan-oriented meditation centers in the country, I found that all use *zafus* (and most use *zabutons*) in their meditation halls. None of the people with whom I spoke were aware of the cultural or economic history of their seat of choice. Spokespeople at these same centers also voiced a preference for Japanese incense and Taiwanese and Japanese bells. Here, then, it would seem, is some evidence of a Zen, or at least East Asian, hegemony in Elite Buddhist American practice; in stating this I do not, of course, mean that there are not many sorts of Elite Buddhist meditators, but rather that all of the meditative options seem to be stuffed with Zen *kapok* and covered and colored for the den from before they even sit down on them.¹⁹

Still, though it is not inaccurate, simply stating that Buddhism in America has become “Zenified” is insufficient. Other, interrelated predilections are at work. In particular, the picture of the “Zenified” Buddhist American suggests a tension between a powerful discourse favoring a unified Buddhist practice centered on meditation and a disposition towards individualism in religious activity. In coming to terms with Buddhism in the West, Elite Buddhists insist that they must retool Buddhism to fit the common lifestyles and values that are variously seen

as the essence of the new American Buddhism. The model may be Zen, as with the emphasis on the use of cushions, but the paradoxical aim is the development of a national style of Buddhism acceptable in a wide range of Elite Buddhist personal lifestyles. In the ongoing conversation among Elite Buddhists about how to make one's own place under the one big meditative parasol is articulated a desire for orthopraxy amidst a plethora of domestic options.

In an essay from the current handbook of Elite Buddhism, the misnamed *Complete Guide to Buddhist America*, edited by Don Morreale, Jack Kornfield, one of the senior figures in the Vipassana movement, writes of the transformation of Buddhist practices from their Asian antecedents.²⁰ He writes that while living in Thailand and Burma he discovered that, in the great part of Buddhist Asia, Buddhism is a "great religion just like any other." That is, like worshipers of Western religions, "the majority of Buddhists do not really practice" (i.e., practice meditation) (p. xxiv). For Kornfield, one of the first lessons that he had to learn in order to practice Buddhism successfully in an Asian monastery was to "take what is good." He implicitly offers this as a description of and prescription for Buddhist America. And, in "taking what is good," Elite Buddhist Americans pick and choose from the Buddhist traditions laid out on the American buffet. "Taking what is good" in part follows from what Kornfield refers to as the "integration" of meditation practice into the lifestyles of lay individuals and its attendant shift from a public to private sphere (pp. xxiii–xxiv).²¹ Unlike much of Buddhism in Asia, Buddhism here is not monastically oriented. Meditation must be undertaken amidst the competing constraints of family, work, and secular culture. Thus, Elite Buddhist meditation is most often a home practice. Though Elite Buddhists often undertake the study of meditation under the guidance of others, meditation technique is also learned in books and videos and conducted in private or in small, intimate groups.²² In all of this, Kornfield sees an exceptionalism to Buddhism in the West in which a "North American vehicle is being created" (p. xxx). It is here, "by taking what is good," that the ancient divisions of Japanese and Tibetan and Burmese

will be forgotten, where their “wisdom” will join with that of America to heal old wounds and make a new, stronger whole. He writes that Buddhists “must beware of sectarianism,” while still respecting the differences in Buddhist paths (pp. xxvi–xxvii). The key is to adapt Buddhism to North America without “losing its essence” (p. xxviii).

Ultimately, as Kornfield’s stark, somewhat Orientalist admission admits, the authority of that essence is seated in and determined by an ideal of the individual. Kornfield is concerned here with the manner in which Buddhist values permeate other aspects of life, but also that those values be derived from a kind of pure Buddhism of practice that emerges from the individual (p. xxx). Thus, for us, the culture of consumption surrounding cushions and other meditation materials points not merely to some diffuse Zen hegemony, with its distinctive ideas and meditation patterns, but to the Elite Buddhist American emphasis on individualism. The discourse of individualism articulated by Kornfield and many others and the consumption habits of Elite Buddhists reinforce one another. According to managers and evident from the companies’ literature, aesthetics and quality of construction are of primary importance to their customers—more so than any sense of authenticity attached to Asian make. The makers count on their customers buying the cushions for use at home and for something other than meditation. One Samadhi Cushions ad, promoting the variety of *zafu* color options, notes, “If you close your eyes while meditating, you’ll miss the colors.” The cushions are lifestyle choices as well as religious articles. They are the options of those who have options. Though the customers seem to vary primarily by names of the styles of meditation that they perform, the cushions are sold with options of color, size, style, design, fill, and cover material. They are sold as couch pillows and general-purpose seating. They are sold to complement a room, not just a practice. This is not, of course, to say that these cushions are exclusively decorative at all, but only that they are also decorative.

CONCLUSIONS

That Buddhist development in North America should involve the crossing of traditional borders and a renegotiation of authority in ritual and doctrinal decisions should certainly not be surprising. Elite Buddhist conflicts and decisions reflect the character and habits of the class of Americans involved in these activities.²³ Still, many of the critiques of the authenticity of Buddhism in America rest on just these sorts of border crossings and renegotiations. But, in truth, as Edward M. Brunner notes, authenticity is a guise for just the sort of issues of authority discussed above. What is authentic is predicated upon who gets to decide what is right and what is wrong.²⁴ For Elite Buddhists in America, just as the site of authority on so many non-religious issues is the individual, so too are individual preferences, individual privacy, individual needs heavily privileged in religious or “spiritual” considerations. Though conversations about authenticity and legitimacy are not absent from Elite Buddhist discourse, they are rarely exclusionist and seem more to revolve around the realm of technical meditational issues than meditation materials. Elite Buddhist Americans are a practical lot, wanting to use what works, and what is most comfortable in the painful positions that meditation calls for. Amidst such simple considerations, Buddhism can change. You may meditate in a chair, on a bench, on a *gomden*. And, if most use a *zafu*, well, that is an accommodation based upon individual choice also.

Others would not be so sanguine. Jan Nattier compares Elite Buddhists to the Chinese literati of the third and fourth centuries C.E., who, in the chaotically creative days after the fall of the Han, went to great pains to adapt what they liked of Buddhism to their own views—primarily, as in North America, with regard to the idea of emptiness. Buddhism in Six Dynasties China, as in contemporary North America, was initially attractive as a sort of “cultural exotica,” but later was adapted and acculturated. The result in China was a Chinese family of Buddhisms that were radically different from their Indian origins and remain with us today (to the greatest degree, in the U.S. in the form of Zen, and in East Asia as Pure Land).²⁵

The problem here, as in China, lies, for many observers of Buddhism in the West, not so much in the changes occurring as in the attitude behind the changes. Tessa Bartholomeusz acerbically critiques the American fascination with the “East” and its symbols as a form of neo-Orientalism, maintaining that a fragmentary appropriation of Asian religions as a means of personal self-discovery reenacts the “Orientalist politics” of domination. Here again, her critique centers on an authority for determining religious and cultural choices seated in the individual.²⁶ She is specifically concerned with sympathizers, whom she refers to in the Buddhist context as “Buddhophiles,” and not converts. Nevertheless, in her view, the decontextualization and commodification of Asian music, history, religious artifacts, and objects by both scholars and “Buddhophiles” is evidence of the continuing arrogance and presumptive authority of Westerners towards their former economic and continuing spiritual colonies in the East.

If the level of rhetoric here seems too high for a discussion of the uses of over-priced pillows, consider again the centrality of both meditation and personal choice to the devotees of Elite Buddhism. The point that Bartholomeusz makes is well taken. Elite Buddhists are, unconsciously for the most part, it is true, attempting to make a monoculture of their received traditions. In their discourses on emptiness and in their choices of seating, the variety of Buddhism is lost, and with that variety goes some of its intellectual, historical, and emotional complexity. The cultural and political diversity of global Buddhisms seems to have been flattened, mainstreamed (as Patrick, our one of our cushion makers has, perhaps naively, desired)—all in an effort to reach the market of potential Buddhists out there and confirm the predilections of those already on the inside. The contours of the world’s Buddhist landscapes appear to have been smoothed out for what may, unfortunately, be the biggest vehicle yet—the wide American SUV (sports utility vehicle).

Nevertheless, ultimately, even the longing for diversity and righteously indignant responses such as that of Bartholomeusz may miss the point, fingering as they still do residual, essentialist, and static notions of Buddhist

authenticity and history. The boundaries of authenticity and authority that she delineates are not, for me, as I have described it with regard to cushions, so clear.²⁷ This is not to say that Orientalism as a historical category of Asian-Western relationships is inapplicable to the conditions of consumption that I am describing. Kornfield's own writings are clear evidence of the sorts of Elite Buddhist positions to which we must be attuned. But, much of our condemnation (though perhaps not our sadness) of even the most egregious misinterpretations and misappropriations seems vain. The history of Buddhism, of many religions, is one of ideas and practices, as commodities, texts, and bodies, crossing boundaries of time, space, and language, not as whole and complete systems, but as fragments, open-ended gestures, inevitably to be spun into new forms. As Brunner, Ulf Hannerz, and other anthropologists have argued for years, acculturation or cultural change (poor words, but we do not have space for that argument) are inevitable, both in some imagined slower-paced past and in today's hyperactive, hyper-capitalist globalized milieu. Religions, and all other sets of embodied practices, change as the people who embody them change. They move as the people who embody them move. Consumption—and capitalism—reflects and guides our changing sense of ourselves, spawning transformation, as Daniel Miller has observed, with new homogeneity and new heterogeneity.²⁸

There is no doubt that Elite Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers have “misconstrued” the received historical traditions of Buddhism in idea and practice for both venal and noble reasons. They will continue to do so—creatively, painfully, and, sometimes, domineeringly and harmfully. As Bartholomeusz argues, our focus should be on the process. And in that process, Elite Buddhist Americans and the murky pool of sympathizers surrounding them will make something new. It will not, we hope, be something soulless, passionless, slick, and glossy. But it will, no doubt, be very little like that with which they began. Ultimately, for Buddhists and scholars alike, our emphasis and interest should remain with the making and not that unknown and unknowable outcome.

NOTES

1. I am not the first to make this claim. Among the notable works in American religious history that have focused upon consumption and the construction of religious practices and identities are Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search For American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying & Selling Of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
2. Daniel Miller, “Consumption as the Vanguard of History,” in Daniel Miller, ed. *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 48.
3. Miller, “Consumption” 34.
4. Edward Tenner. “How the Chair Conquered the World.” *The Wilson Quarterly Online* (<http://wwics.si.edu/organiza/affil/wilson/WWICS/OUTREACH/WQ/WQSELECT/CHAIR.HTM>). Reprinted from the *Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 1997.
5. Of course, other sorts of Buddhists, certainly those involved in the engaged Buddhist movement, have reconfigured the relationship between materialism and religion in their aim of social justice. But these are really separate matters. Interpretations of engaged Buddhism such as Sallie King’s, in a recent anthology, give little sense of how our relationships with the material both indicate and result in the construction of religious/social practices and identities. That is not her aim. See Sallie B. King, “Conclusion: Buddhist Social Activism” in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) 409–413. As Miller notes, what is often seen as an anti-consumption stance on that part of the green movement or many Buddhist Americans, in fact actually constitutes a significant transformation of consumption practices. Miller, “Consumption” 47.
6. Todd Stein, “Zen Sells.” *Shambhala Sun* 8 (November, 1999) 2:37.
7. Schmidt 13.
8. The name in Japanese, while sometimes translated “sewn seat” by cushion makers, actually means simply “seat” or “cushion” in Chinese ideographs. It is used as the translation for the Sanskrit word *asana*, “seat.” *Zafu* and the related verb to sit in Chinese, *zuo*, have everyday meanings, but they also may

refer to the specific kind of sitting done in meditation and particularly in Zen meditation. I did expend some effort on attempting to fill in the genealogy of this commodity, but have been able to find out little more than that it appears to be associated with the Soto school in Japan.

9. The prices quoted here, as elsewhere, are certainly out of date, but increases in cushion prices, as in the larger economy, have been small over the last year or more. In any case, I supply them as an indication of the relative expense for each item.
10. Dinty W. Moore, *The Accidental Buddhist* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1997) 93.
11. Moore 93.
12. Don Morreale, ed. *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998) 370.
13. For brief statements of Nattier's typology, see her "Buddhism Comes To Main Street," *Wilson Quarterly*, 21 (Spring 1997) 2, 72 or "Visible and Invisible," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1995) 42–49.
14. Thomas Tweed, "Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion" in Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen eds., *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1999) 71–90.
15. Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912 : Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) xxiv and chapter two.
16. Tweed, "Night-stand" 84.
17. From the *Tricycle* ad rate card, fall 1999, which can be found on the magazine's web site at www.tricycle.com.
18. From the *Shambhala Sun* ad rate card, fall 1999. For a copy, send e-mail to advertising@shambhalasun.com
19. Many Asian and Asian American Buddhist leaders, on the other hand, while usually open-minded about practice and congregational make-up, do not often seem to take an active interest in the goal of a unified Buddhism. The doctrinal and ritual distinctions between types of Buddhism are very real for them, if not always based upon an entirely accurate historical perspective.
20. Jack Kornfield, "American Buddhism," in Morreale xxi–xxx.
21. According to Kornfield, the "integration" of meditative practice into normative American lifestyles is part of a process of Buddhist development

in the West that also includes shared practice between traditional Buddhist divisions, democratization, and feminization.

22. In describing a rough organizational parallel to the sort of individualization of practice Kornfield describes, Morreale notes that there has been a “ten-fold increase” in North American Buddhist centers claiming a non-sectarian designation and refers to such centers under the label “Buddhayaana.” For Morreale, the development of local organizational autonomy under a principle of self-ascribed non-sectarianism signals the growth of an ecumenical movement or, as he puts it, a tendency towards “polydenominationalism” in Buddhist America centered around meditation. Don Morreale, “Everything Has Changed in Buddhist America,” in Morreale xv.
23. We should not imagine that any degree of affiliation or conversion to Buddhism (or any other religion) will necessarily entail a thorough abandonment of prior values and habits and no transformation or reinterpretation of the received practices and ideologies. It never happens that way.
24. Edward M. Brunner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96 (1994) 2, 408.
25. Jan Nattier “Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America” in Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1998) 191–192.
26. Tessa Bartholomeusz “Spiritual Wealth and Neo-Orientalism” in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 98: 35 (Winter 1998) 1, 38.
27. Bartholomeusz 36–37. It is also not at all clear to me that North American religious adaptation, co-optation, or decontextualization, however crass and misguided, or even harmful, is necessarily equivalent to Orientalist domination.
28. See Daniel Miller, *Capitalism : An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Berg, 1997) 15.